



AN EDUCATIONAL SERVICE OF THE
COLORADO RIVER WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

“Just Add Water”

Water has always been the most valuable substance in Colorado. True gold, silver and minerals sent settlers to this state by the hoards. But, water has always been seen as the most essential ingredient to surviving here.

In 1820-21, Major Stephen Long led an army expedition to explore the lands of the West U.S. up to the base of the Rocky Mountains. His expedition biographer Dr. Edwin James described the eastern plains of Colorado as “wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.” The maps drawn after the expeditions return labeled the Great Plains running across Eastern Colorado leading up to the Rockies as “The Great American Desert,” a designation that occurred on many maps up to the late 1850’s.

Inhospitable. Worthless. To the west of the Eastern Plains of Colorado lay difficult mountains that fell off to even more arid regions to the south and west.

Water makes this state livable. Recognizing the scarcity of water and its absolute necessity for maintaining an economy, the framers of Colorado’s Constitution included provisions unheard of for states east of the Mississippi River:

- It is every Coloradoans constitutional right to use water.
- Every Coloradoan has the right to transport that water over long distances to bring it from where it occurs to where it is needed.
- It is illegal to waste water.

John Wesley Powell said that the West requires new institutions and new ways of living because of its dry environment. The new ways of thinking include recognizing the value of water. A recent poll conducted for the Colorado River Water Conservation District showed that the single most important natural resource in Western Colorado is its water ... more important than wildlife and even more important than open space.

It is rumored that Colorado has more water lawyers than the rest of the United States combined. Resting behind that allegation is the fact that Colorado water is rapidly becoming over-allocated in many areas and legal fights ensue from this scarcity.

The true power of water in Colorado is not just as an essential requirement for human survival, it is economic. Every Coloradoan can directly or indirectly trace the money in their wallet to water. Less water, less money. More water, more money. Significant portions of the “Great American Desert” in Colorado have been changed due to irrigation, digging canals to transport water, building elaborate water projects and by moving water great distances. The key to transforming an unlivable land into a thriving and profitable one? Just add water.

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